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ABSTRACT

A Title I 5 year Visual Literacy Experimental Program was initiated in four kindergarten classes during the 1972-73 academic year. The program was designed to focus on a hierarchy of visual skills and aesthetic experiences involving body language, graphic expressions, and photography, and to correlate these with the objectives of the classroom teacher. Conventional techniques for distinguishing differences and similarities among tastes and tactile impressions, light and dark, open and closed, shape, hue and size, space perception, and rates of movement were greatly enhanced by photographing these experiences and playing them back to the children. The childrens' verbal complexity index was increased. The incorporation of a tape recorder was complementary to the overall goal of developing vocabulary, articulation, and the appreciation of visual and verbal forms. The program was initiated enthusiastically by the classroom teachers and was relatively easy to carry out. (MC)

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VISUAL LITERACY: AN EXCITING ENVIRONMENTAL ADVENTURE

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With the invention of the printing press, the whole of education in our Western society came to develop and use verbal literacy as the matrix for speaking, reading, and writing. Similarly, with the advent of television and the realization that visually we can perceive and decode infinite quantities of information expending relatively little time or energy, the need has emerged for children to develop skills in reading, writing, planning, and creating visuals for intentional communication. Education confronts a visual minded generation whose pluralistic experiences demand a multi-sensory and a multi-disciplinary approach to learning. If we are to reach the child whose vision competencies have been maturing since infancy and are now heightened by the impact of media; then, we must provide an educational link between that visual self, the environment, and the verbal skills he will need in language development. We can build on the individual's visual experiences with verbal associations and; thus, create in him an articulate awareness which integrates his cognitive abilities with his self-concept, his feelings, his attitudes, his interests, his comprehension and value judgments.

Four kindergarten classes have been introduced to a Title I - 5 year Visual Literacy Experimental Program in the Richmond Public Schools. The first phase of the program began this academic year, 1972-1973. The program has been projected to continue with the same students through their fifth year of schooling. Children involved in the project include classes of Ms. June Williams and Ms. Linda Wilson at Elizabeth Redd School, and Ms. Lander Manuel and Ms. Eileen Strulson at Ruffin Road School.

* Mrs. Gant is monitor of the Visual Literacy Program. Mrs. Linda Tomi Puig, Elementary Consultant, is assisting with the Visual Literacy curriculum planning and development.

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A week's schedule for the monitor begins with Visual Literacy curriculum planning, preparation of instructional materials, and small group instruction. This kind of intensive planning is continued intermittently between the four classes with the classroom teachers playing an integral part. Each of the four classes are intensively involved in visual literacy instruction for two ninety minute sessions per week.

The program design for this year focuses on a hierarchy of visual skills and aesthetic experiences involving body language, graphic expression, and photography, and correlates these with the objectives of the classroom teacher. Initial activities have centered on feelings and the expression of moods and emotions in pictures or through body language. We began asking "What does a picture mean? How does it speak visually?" The photographic statement can be made up of elements that function similarly to the elements of a spoken or written statement. Who or what is the subject element of the picture? What is the subject doing? Who or what is the subject doing it to? What sounds, smells, or tastes do you experience as you look at the picture? What took place before the act being depicted? Why is the event happening? What is being said? What will happen after the event has been depicted? As with words in a verbal expression, visuals can also possess a certain stress. In scanning a visual sequence, the coloring or composition of a single picture may in fact emphasize its message. Thus, showing that visuals can have a linguistic structure.

We experienced distinguishing differences and similarities among tastes and tactile impressions. The visual response to these sensory experiences was photographed and evoked much excited verbalization from the children during the playback in which they looked at themselves and how they communicated without words. It was noted that the children's verbal complexity index was increased. Follow-up to this activity focused on the visual skill of distinguishing light

from dark. The approach drew upon shadowplay with body language and with objects which were placed on the overhead projector and whose shadow outlines were then traced on the blackboard. A simple pair of scissors motivated the children to experiment with a visual sequencing from opened to closed and the changing of figure-ground relationships as each new shadow superimposed the previous outlines. An adaptation of the game twister was designed to include the recognition of differences and similarities in shape, hue, and size gradation. The game gave additional practice in left and right motor coordination and perception of space relationships. The perception of motion and varying rates of movement came together in the form of observation and discovery play with toys. Tops spin. Balls bounce. Windmills turn around and around. Buttons on string buzz and whirl. See the color. Hear the sound. Mobiles dance and twirl. Parachutes float and boats float. Airplanes fly and glide. The yo-yo goes first down, then up. The rocking chair--it rocks back and forth, back and forth. We made many of these toys and Mrs. Strulson's class even wrote and illustrated a story about their toy workshop. Still many other visual skills remain to be perceived, internalized and nurtured including perception of distance, height, and depth, recognition of a whole shape even when partially occluded, "Reading" simple body language and making simple body language utterances, recognition of groups of objects, "Reading" and composing a sequence of objects and/or body language arranged in sequential order, "Reading" and "Composing" a sequence of objects and/or body language arranged in cogent order. Other concepts to develop would be to arrange in original yet significant order, to arrange so as to communicate an intended idea about a process, to communicate non-physical concepts, to transmit a fictional narrative, to create a desired emotional reaction, or to express a personal emotion so that others may understand it. Soon the children will be acquainted with their own camera as a tool for self expression and a means to master the grammar and syntaxes of the visual language through their personal points of view. Each individual will begin to photograph subject matter

of his own choosing. He will keep a picture record and as the resulting complexity of his verbalization increases, the monitor and classroom teacher will transcribe from audio tape his word descriptions to parallel what he experiences seeing. In time, the children may want to tape record stories about their pictures, which will be transcribed into the written verbal form. We then experience language visually, verbally, and auditorily, but most important, the children are reading, writing, planning, and creating learning material from the experimental storehouse of their minds and sharing their impressions and expression with others. In the process, each child has the multi-faceted opportunity to develop his vocabulary, articulation, appreciation of visual and verbal forms and respect for the masterworks of language. The goals involve helping the child to organize his ideas, express them well and to evaluate and improve his performance. During the five years, the full scope of the visual literacy program will mature toward creating animations and making films that will combine the visual and verbal for intentional communications.

Visuals are a language. Underlying each intentional communication is an idea. When you transmit that idea by visual means, you are "talking" visually without words. The skills applied in both visual and verbal communications are learned. Verbal practices have taken priority over the non-verbal skills, thus, placing emphases on verbal skills rather than the visual. However, the visual vocabulary develops very early in life in informal unconscious and subtle ways preceding the later development of verbal skills. A baby watches the repeated performance of mother warming his milk bottle and anticipates comfort and being fed. He is learning to interpret the visual signs in his environment, attaching meaning to expressions and gestures; thus, storing his memory with this visual vocabulary for future recall. All of us use visual body language in communicating with others. We characteristically smile or frown, wave our hands, shake our fists or bow our heads to tell others what we are thinking, feeling, or wanting. Whether language speaks through an action, sign, or an object, it communicates a message to be read and translated. The child who

spends many hours watching television becomes quite adept at reading visual signs; however, this learning is informal and untutored; the result is a passing vocabulary. Herewith lies the realization of a need for visual literacy training and "understanding media." Visual literacy refers to that group of skills which enables an individual to compose visual messages and to read and interpret the visual messages of others with sensitivity. Students need a vehicle in the school curriculum that provides the opportunity to record and interpret their world both objectively and subjectively. Schools must recognize and incorporate timely concepts and tools from this age of mass media. The abundance of information that comes to us through not only television, but movies, magazines, and advertising demands that we both visually and verbally literate in the basic grammar and semantics of visual statements, as well as verbal statements. Children should be given the opportunity to select needed messages from such an abundance of information and to express their personal values through each media and determine interrelationships with the values of others. Teachers will have opportunities to apply visual literacy techniques in motivating and challenging the children to other avenues of learning and in reaching the non-verbal individual. With knowledge that the eye dominates our other senses and that it is the door through which some ninety percent of our learning enters, how can we ignore the visual literacy way of doing something about the needs of today's child! How much more enriched is the life of an individual who can communicate his ideas through a variety of channels! How much more understanding comes to the individual who uses all of his senses to comprehend and change his environment!

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